



**Omophagia**, or omophagy (from Greek ωμός "raw") is the eating of raw flesh. The term is of importance in the context of the cult worship of Dionysus.

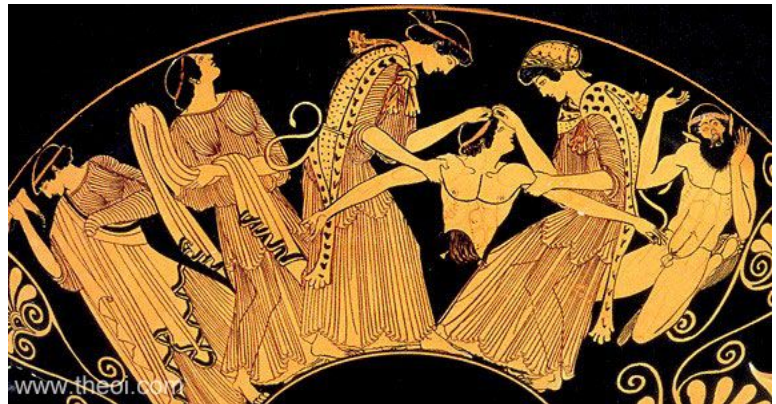
Omophagia is a large element of Dionysiac myth; in fact, one of Dionysus' epithets is Omophagos "Raw-Eater". Omophagia may have been a symbol of the triumph of wild nature over civilization, and a symbol of the breaking down of boundaries between nature and civilization. It might also have been symbolic that the worshippers were internalizing Dionysus' wilder traits and his association with brute nature, in a sort of "communion" with the god.

Euripides' play *The Bacchae* includes allusions to omophagia, and its companion sparagmos, an act of rending or tearing apart (see more below). In this

play, the character Agave tears her son Pentheus apart while under the influence of Dionysus. Because Euripides depicts Agave as engaging in sparagmos, he likely intended for the audiences to assume she engaged in omophagia as well: additionally, the character Cadmus compares Agave's actions to the story of Actaeon, who was consumed by his own hunting dogs—this association further suggests that omophagia took place.

**Sparagmos** (Ancient Greek: σπαραγμός, from σπαράσσω sparasso, "tear, rend, pull to pieces") is an act of rending, tearing apart, or mangling, usually in a Dionysian context.

In Dionysian rite as represented in myth and literature, a living animal, or sometimes even a human being, is sacrificed by being dismembered. Sparagmos was frequently followed by omophagia (the eating of the raw flesh of the one dismembered). It is associated with the Maenads or Bacchantes, followers of Dionysus, and the Dionysian Mysteries. Historically, however, there is little indication that women celebrating the rites of Dionysus dismembered animals or ate raw flesh.



Examples of sparagmos appear in Euripides's play *The Bacchae*. In one scene guards sent to control the Maenads witness them pulling a live bull to pieces with their hands. Later, after King Pentheus has banned the worship of Dionysus, the god lures him into a forest, to be torn limb from limb by Maenads, including his own mother Agave. According to some myths, Orpheus, regarded as a prophet of Orphic or Bacchic religion, died when he was dismembered by raging Thracian women.

*"Dionysian sacrificial ritual centered upon a two-fold movement of **dismemberment and devouring**. Sparagmos originated as an ancient Greek ritual that included the rending of a live sacrificial victim. It was accompanied by an immediate omophagy: the eating of the raw dismembered flesh by cult initiates. The flesh was believed to contain the essence of Dionysus, much like the **Christian eucharist**. Moreover, the flesh was "fresh," i.e. just killed, to prevent any incidental loss of essence."*

-- David S. Stymeist, *"The Rituals of Sparagmos and Omophagy in Tragedy, Romance, and Horror Genres."* UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA, 1995.



**Eucharist** – Christian ritual; of consuming consecrated bread and wine that represent the body and blood of Christ.

### **Zagreus myth**

Zeus mated with his daughter, Persephone, who bore a son, Zagreus, which is another name for Dionysus. In her jealousy, Hera then aroused the Titans to attack the child. These monstrous beings, their faces whited with chalk, attacked the infant as he was

looking in a mirror, and cut him to pieces with knives. After the murder, the Titans devoured the dismembered corpse. But the heart of the infant god was saved and brought to Zeus by Athena, and Dionysus was born again -- swallowed by Zeus and begotten on Semele. Zeus was angry with the Titans and destroyed them with his thunder and lightning; but from their ashes mankind was born.

-- Morford, P.O., and Robert J. Lenardon. *Classical Mythology*: Fourth Edition. New York: Longman, 1991; 63.

### **Symbolism**

Sparagmos (dismemberment/dissolution) and omophagy (devouring/incorporation) are part of a symbolic process of renewal and repair of the human psyche. Renewal is brought about through destruction. We tear apart the old body (or body politic) and then consume it in order to take the new order into ourselves.



DISSOLUTION/DISEMPOWERMENT



RESTORATION/RESTITUTION



RENEWAL AFTER DESTRUCTION

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